OYSTER INDUSTRY

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Synopsis of Film

1. Oyster Docks at Baltimore.
2. Buoys Marking Oyster Beds.
3. Dredging Oysters from Sea Bottom.
4. The Oysters' Enemies—Starfish, Crabs, and "Drills."
5. "Drills." (A Species of Salt Water Mollusk.)
6. Starfish.
7. Horseshoe Crab.
8. Oyster Boat Returning to Dock.
9. Unloading the Oysters.
10. Way in Which Oysters are Opened for Market.
11. Oyster Shells. Strewn over Oyster Beds to Make Homes for Baby Oysters.
12. The Oyster at Different Ages.
13. At Five Months.
14. Six One-Year Oysters on an Old Shell.
15. Oyster at Two Years.
16. A Full-grown Oyster.

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TO many of the children of the interior of our country the oyster is unknown. Till very recent years the shipping of oysters to any great distance was impracticable because they quickly spoil and become worthless. In these days of scientific methods, however, the oysters are shelled, put into air-tight receptacles, and carried on fast trains hundreds of miles to inland cities. A very few great companies control all of this shipping trade.

In Europe, oysters have been and still are a luxury enjoyed only by the rich, but in America they are not very expensive, and people of moderate means regard them as among the necessaries of life. Oysters have advanced in price but little in twenty years as compared with an advance of from 25% to 75% in the prices of eggs, poultry, and meats.

Mounds of shells found by the white man on his arrival in America indicated that the Indians of the coast lived largely upon oysters. Near the Damariscotta River in Maine, there is a single mound containing about 7,000,000 bushels, though no oysters are found there at the present time. The early white settlers, like the Indians, obtained their living to a great extent from the natural beds of oysters, but increase in population and greater demand have reduced the supply from such sources. It was evident that, unless the oysterman cultivated the oyster as the farmer did his land, the oyster in America would become extinct. Long before the scientists had made a study of the oyster's habits of life and the conditions necessary for its growth, the practical oysterman observed that oysters were taken from the sea floor fastened to various kinds of hard-surfaced objects. He reasoned that such objects placed in barren spots would establish artificial oyster beds, of which he could justly claim ownership.

Thus oyster culture began in the United States, and it has developed to such extent that more than one half of our oysters, worth more than two-thirds of the value of the total product, are obtained from artificial beds, which are either owned by private fishermen, or leased from the states in whose waters they are. With increasing facilities for gathering the oysters, the planters have extended their beds from near the shore into deep water. Power dredges, operated from steam and naphtha vessels, have largely replaced the hand tongs used in boats propelled by oars or sails.

Shells from which other oysters have been removed are the finest material to plant for the raising of young oysters. In 1911, the oyster farmers of the United States "planted" many million bushels of shells. These empty shells were formerly used as fertilizer on account of the large amount of lime that they contain, or were used to surface roads. Many of the finest roads in the east are the so-called "shell" roads.

In two ways the shells are serviceable to the oyster housed within. They afford a permanent protection and rest, and as they slowly dissolve they furnish the lime that the oyster requires for its growth.

In July, when the female oyster discharges her eggs into the water, the oysterman carries out boat loads of shells which he distributes over his beds. Each minute single-cell oyster egg within a few hours increases to sixteen cells and tiny bristles appear. These, moving together, give the group of cells a little motion, and this period of the oyster's life is known as the swimming stage. Within three days these cells have become definite parts of the oyster and a thin microscopic shell appears. For three days the oyster swims about, but at the end of that time, because of the increasing weight of the shell, it is ready to establish itself in a permanent home.

This is the crucial period in the oyster's life. If it descends to a place where it becomes covered with mud, it smothers. If too many of its kind settle in too small a place, it grows misshapen or dies from overcrowding or lack of food. It must have free space enough to open its shell for the admission of the ocean currents from which its food is obtained. From the ocean water its own vibrating bristles waft the small plants, called diatoms, through its gills, where a fine sievelike membrane allows the water to pass while retaining the food. A single oyster will strain from 30 to 35 quarts of water a day in search of food.

If conditions are right, the oyster grows large, fat and juicy, and is ready for market in from two to five years. But in only a relatively small number of instances are the conditions favorable. Millions of eggs are carried to sea; millions more are stifled by the mud in which they settle, or by overcrowding, so that only a small number of the millions of eggs which a single oyster produces live to form an oyster of edible size. In addition to the misfortunes already mentioned, the oyster has other enemies besides man. A certain fish, called the drumfish, is particularly fond of the young oysters, that are called "sets." At times these fish pass in schools over the oyster beds, where they grind up the young oysters in their bony mouths, destroying a large bed within a few hours. Another enemy is the starfish, which grasps the oyster in its strong arms, forces open the shell and absorbs the soft oyster. Still other enemies in the oyster beds are the horseshoe crab and the "drill," a small snail-like animal which uses its round, rough tongue like a file, boresa hole through the shell of the hapless oyster, and sucks up the meat within.

The film shows oyster boats and oystermen, the planting of shells, dredging, the picking out of starfish and "drills," and the unloading of oysters.

The still pictures exhibit the oyster from its "set" age to that attained when seven years old; also, close views of starfish and "drills," and one of a horseshoe crab.

The culture of oysters is carried on from Massachusetts to Texas, and from Washington to California. The yearly crop averages over 15,000,000 bushels, and its wholesale value is over $10,000,000.

Questions, Topics, Suggestions

1. What states lead in the production of oysters?
2. Describe the manner in which oysters are shipped inland.
3. Why is Chesapeake Bay particularly suitable for oyster culture?
4. What qualities make an oyster particularly desirable as food?
5. Tell in what way an oyster bed may be affected by the discharge of muddy or polluted water from the rivers; by storms; by overcrowding; by lack of limestone and shells; by muddy bottom of sea; by living enemies of the oyster.

References

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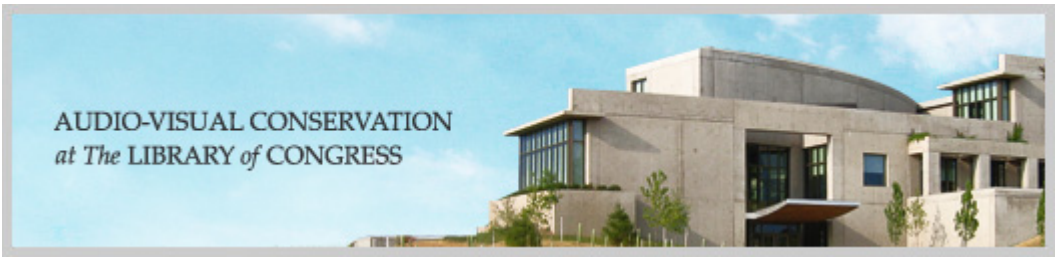

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